Céline describes his weeping anal sores, bleeding from the eyes, boiling enemas, his apartment confiscated, manuscripts thrown in the rubbish by looters, his mother dying alone on a bench in the street. He even imagines the reader suffering from terminal rectal cancer. He does not seek to elicit pity or assume madness for the sake of leniency, but destabilizes all social and linguistic norms to inflict the literary equivalent of the horror he has witnessed. He is singing a modern *chanson de geste*, not the truth, neither his nor that of his enemies; yet his "fable" has as much validity as our historical reality. The two novels, *Fable* and *Normance* are densely allusive and brilliantly inventive – stylistic tours de force inspired by Breughel and Bosch. Two panels of an unfinished triptych, they should not be read as a linear narrative.

Normance recounts the story of an episode airbrushed from memory: the bombing of Montmartre by the RAF in April 1944. As in *Ulysses*, the action takes place during a single day and the entire book is given over to evoking the terror felt by civilians under heavy bombing. Dedicated to Pliny the Elder, who died in the eruption of Vesuvius that covered Pompeii, *Normance*, like *Fable*, is full of cultural, historic, literary and musical allusions, from Shakespeare, La Fontaine and Pascal to Gounod, Offenbach, Charpentier and Puccini. Céline intended these works as an "opérette macabre", linked to the medieval *danse macabre*. It is stylistically his most challenging work, an affront to the very foundations of our civilization and the lies we tell ourselves in order to live.

The influence of Céline has been profound on writers such as Günter Grass, Kurt Vonnegut, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer and William T. Vollmann. He is the most important French writer of the twentieth century. The danger to his reputation will come when his pamphlets leave copyright protection. His anti-Semitism will be used to denigrate his contribution to literature, just as *Deux Siècles ensemble* was used to undermine Solzhenitsyn. There are regular attacks on Céline in French, in works such as André Rossel-Kirschen's *Céline et le grand mensonge* (2004). The attacks have to be personal, because his writing gift was incomparable. Pound said that Céline's greatest sin was that he saw too clearly. He, like Sade, held up a mirror to all that was base and ignoble. When he said that no matter how fast the terrified civilians ran fleeing the advancing Wehrmacht they could never catch up with the retreating French army, he scandalized a nation that had to live a lie to assuage its conscience. He became a scapegoat for France. Following an amnesty, he lived tending his patients in Meudon, until his death in 1961; dressed like a tramp, surrounded by barbed wire, with his dogs and parrot, he paraded his abjection for journalists, in penitence for his own vile words and his country's shame.

The humane side of Céline is ignored. He cared for the poor and sick. He loved animals and children and wept easily. He was devoted to those who were loyal to him. Music and dance were his passion. Like Nietzsche he could not believe in a deity that does not dance. Ballerinas were the flickering lights – the inexhaustible fount of beauty that guided him through the night of our dark world. Early drafts of *Fable* have great tenderness; he describes massaging Bébert's frozen paw, keeping the cat hidden next to his heart so that starving civilians did not eat him; and recalls his blind mother feeling her way through the war-torn streets.

His true achievement is lost in translation because it is so closely tied to the French language. Céline, who read widely in English and loved Shakespeare, had little time for "trouducuteurs". His identification of them with assholes was born of the immutability and perfection of his style. Anglophone readers did not understand that he was not simply using the vernacular of the streets and breaking taboos, as Henry Miller ("my unfortunate plagiarist") did, but that he was reinventing and revitalizing a whole language and culture through his style ("The equivalent does not exist in American or English. They have not even dreamed of it"). Ralph Mannheim's versions have largely superseded the bowdlerized and inadequate translations of Céline's early books. In the more recent reissues, Mary Hudson (who translated *Fable for Another Time* in 2003 for the University of Nebraska Press) and now Marlon Jones have fought heroically, if not quixotically, to capture the impact of the originals. Both books would have benefitted from more comprehensive introductions and footnotes. Stanford Luce's version of *Conversations with Professor Y* offers a bilingual text, but the translation and notes, dating from 1986, badly need revision. Elegantly produced, in a fine translation, incorporating Céline's 1936 corrections and an illuminating introduction by Philippe Sollers, John Harman's version of *Semmelweis* is essential reading for anyone interested in Céline. The most accessible of his books, it should be required reading for feminists and for everyone in the medical profession.

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SOPHIE RATCLIFFE

Hélène Cixous

HYPERDREAM
Translated by Beverley Bie Brahic
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In an essay published in 1989, the critic, novelist and philosopher Hélène Cixous theorized about the relationship between texts and loss. The act of writing, she claimed, "is linked to the experience of disappearance, to the feeling of having lost the key to the world". *Hyperdream*, one of a series of autobiographical works that Cixous has been producing since the late 1990s, offers a world full of such absence. The resulting book, her thirty-ninth work of fiction, is deliberately searching. Written in dense poetic prose, with the losses and gains of Beverley Bie Brahic's English translation, it hovers, dreamily, between novel and memoir.

The backward-looking begins quite literally, as the narrator recounts her daily ritual of rubbing cortisone ointment into her mother's ageing torso. Eve has a degenerative skin condition, and we are invited to watch the negotiation around her "ulcerations and gutted boils". "I anoint. J'unction", the narrator says, referring to the treatment. As the pun suggests, the physical proximity between mother and daughter is not matched by mental closeness. It is a grotesque but tender scene. The narrator is blunt about the way it gets under her skin:

> *You can always lose more*, I thought, I twined my thought around this thought, I was anointing my mother with circular gestures . . . no longer shying at the blisters and craters that at the start of the previous year had intimidated me, darting wide cyclopean glances at me whenever I tried to get close to them . . . last year, that morning and evening I did battle with myself, between my powers of reason and my instinct wild with repulsion, it was the idea, an illusion, that the round crevasses edged with a piping of charred skin were looking at me, next thing I knew I'd be putting a finger in their eye.

The strained ritual can be seen as a curious analogy for the relationship between Cixous and her translator, who is forced to "twine" her thoughts around Cixous's cryptic prose. "I am often asked", Bie Brahic notes, "how closely I work with Hélène Cixous." She explains that she completes her translation alone, "wearing away little by little at the difficult points" before showing it to the author. Bie Brahic adds that she "must . . . emphasize how very busy [Cixous] is; she has never pretended to have time to examine a translation sentence by sentence". The admission is revealing. It suggests that Cixous keeps herself at a distance and intimates that credit must be given to Bie Brahic for her creative rendering. The pun on "j'unction" is one such example, stylishly capturing Cixous's play on "oindre" – "joins" – to give both the senses of severance and unction, in a bilingual pun.

Bie Brahic cannot always render the musicality of Cixous's text. In the passage above, the original French is full of assonance, with half-slant rhymes chiming or resonating with the word "mère", as the narrator works in the ointment "par gestes circulaires, par pressions rapides légères exactes, sans plus hésiter désormais à tamponner les bulles et les cratères". Meanwhile, a density of sound builds up around the "crevasses rondes bordées de lisérés de peau cramée", forming an aural equivalent of this body's peaks and troughs.

Bie Brahic makes the most of her medium's felicitous coincidences. For an English reader, the talk of Cyclops and eyes summons thoughts of "I"s, just as skin speaks of boundaries and self-containment. And, like so much of Cixous's writing, this is a novel concerned with what it means to be a self, and, in particular, to be a daughter. The narrator muses on the things that have made her who she is – she writes about her brother, about Jacques Derrida (her "friend J.D."), her reading of Montaigne, and her long dead Algerian father. This bastion of male inheritance is confirmed as she speaks of the object that most defined her – the idea of the "Tower". As the novel begins, we learn of the narrator's need to visit an unspecified tower, somewhere in the south west of France, a visit which goes against her mother's wishes. But as she relates her journey onward, to the tower, the narrative pulls us back to her smaller-scale journey – her daily scaling of her mother's crumbling body, applying steroids like so much cement. This conflict is borne out through the narrative. For our narrator, the image of the tower – and with it, all that is male, phallic, patriarchal – is crumbling, toppled by the force of feminine projection. The narrator's personal apocalypse is mirrored and mapped on the world's affairs, as she writes of "our towers" in Manhattan, and the "terror when the real planes really crashed into them, a black terror which bit into our hearts".

Symbols aside, the emotional movement of the narrative is simple. This is the story of a daughter's reluctant recognition of maternal power. Cixous achieves this at a formal level, when Eve casually mentions a detail about home furnishings: the fact that the old iron-framed bed in her apartment (the bed in which Cixous was conceived) once belonged to one Mr W. Benjamin, Marxist critic and philosopher. With this revelation, Eve changes her daughter's sense of herself: she rewrites her daughter's narrative. Formerly, the narrator writes, she owed "nothing literarily to anyone save for predecessors and contemporaries as declared such as me". The "blow of the bed" puts her life in a new context. "I envisage the hypothesis of a thesis on Benjamin instead of a thesis on Joyce". Nevertheless, as the narrative moves from bricks to beds, the ghost of *Ulysses* dominates, recalling the movement from Stephen's Martello Tower to Molly's jingling bedsprings.

For all its allusions and analogies, *Hyperdream*'s power lies in the story between Eve and her daughter, and between their individual bodies. The narrator keeps anointing until the text's close:

> I was on my knees in front of her. Her skin is worn so thin by the cortisone that she is covered with large violet splotches, bloody lakes formed by abrasions that leak at the slightest touch . . . . She turns towards me. Her huge brown eyes are impatient at finding themselves snared in the old yellowing mesh of her face.

This is a vision of reproach, cutting her daughter, the towering theorist, down to size. After all, as the narrator tells herself:

> I'll be this skin tomorrow . . . . I am practicing . . . . One doesn't know oneself twenty years on. I practice on my mother. Theory, my mother says, is zero. Only practice counts.

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